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SUBJECT: Integration: Netherlands Searches for a "New  
Equilibrium"

THE HAGUE 00002577 001.2 OF 002

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The diverse opinions heard during November 3 meetings between Farah Pandith, Director for Middle East Regional Initiatives, National Security Council, and Dutch government and think tank representatives capture the debate on what integration means for all of Dutch society. Agreement on the causes of social isolation and marginalization remains elusive. Recent political developments further complicate the search for a collective understanding of what "successful" integration would look like in the Netherlands. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (SBU) Expressing frustration with criticisms of the Netherlands as intolerant, Emine Kaya, 2007 Eisenhower Fellow and former Management Coordinator for The European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, questioned religious discrimination as a legitimate barrier to integration. Ms. Kaya believes there are few impediments to religious freedom in the Netherlands; Islamic marriage, Halal food, and Islamic education are all readily available. She emphatically stated: "we have to be very clear what the problem is: is it religion or something else?"

[1](#)3. (SBU) Jan Schoonenboom, research fellow at Scientific Council for the Government (WRR), argued an opposing viewpoint expressing concern over growing right-wing populism (the anti-immigration Freedom Party gained 8 seats in the November 22 elections). He fears that populist rhetoric could leave immigrants and Muslims much more socially isolated and disaffected, encourage a "major backlash" against Muslims in the Netherlands, and increase the propensity for radicalization among Muslim youth. [Note: Schoonenboom authored a controversial study earlier this year that sharply criticized the GONL for its intolerance of Islam.]

[1](#)4. (SBU) Amsterdam Deputy Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb echoed Schoonenboom's concerns about radicalization and populism while arguing that both the Muslim community and the Dutch government need to work together for successful integration. Mr. Aboutaleb, a popular Muslim politician, argues that the Muslim community must use claims of discrimination more carefully as not all outcomes are the result of discrimination. At the same time, he believes that there is still a lack of political will on the part of government ministries to address legitimate symptoms of marginalization such as high drop out rates. Mr. Aboutaleb suggested that progress may simply be a function of time: up until recently many Dutch denied that the Netherlands was an "immigration state" and it is still looking for "a new equilibrium" among all members of Dutch society.

5 (SBU) In subsequent meetings GONL representatives have suggested that barriers to full integration of Muslims may be endemic to Dutch society itself. During a meeting with an Interior Ministry delegation, Secretary General Jan Willem Holtslag observed that "immigrant" children, of whom many are born and raised in the Netherlands, are not viewed by society as truly Dutch. The Dutch term "allochtonen" is still widely used to denote first, second and third generation immigrants. Literally translated it means "non-Dutch." (Note: Legally, "allochtonen" refers to anyone with at least one non-Dutch parent. Some commentators have noted that, by this definition, Queen Beatrix and much of the Royal Family should technically be classified as "allochtonen.") Government officials are increasingly aware of such impermeable boundaries: during a separate meeting, Saskia Tempelman from the Ministry of Justice insightfully pointed out that "categories [e.g. "allochtonen"] create consequences."

6 (U) Fatma Waheb-Wassie, also from the Ministry of Justice, explained that "in the Netherlands the expectation is to just be normal and things will be fine." It was later explained that being 'normal' in Dutch is to blend in with the crowd and not distinguish oneself through dress, achievement or other difference. One Dutch contact shared the Dutch saying, "the cornstalk that sticks out above the rest gets cut down."

COMMENT: Integration and Identity

6 (SBU) Dutch society, once famous for its social tolerance, continues to struggle with its identity in the midst of a growing perception of increasing intolerance toward immigrants. Recent political developments - such as the proposed ban on burqas and the popularity of hard-line Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk(VVD)- highlight the uncertainty of what it means to "successfully" integrate.

THE HAGUE 00002577 002.2 OF 002

Lack of a collective understanding of what constitutes "Dutchness" further complicates integration: what characteristics and behaviors indicate membership of Dutch society.

7 (SBU) Dutch integration presents a paradox: Social categories such as "allochtonen" underscore the division between immigrants and broader Dutch society. Many immigrant groups still identify more closely with the nationality of their country of origin, even after successive generations. This is reflected in the dress, behavior and language that set them apart from "native" Dutch. In the face of continued pressure to conform, it is likely that immigrants will continue to fight for symbols of their identity.

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